

**1914** It Was Their Time

**2014** It Gave Us Ours

## Remembering Ely 1914-1918



Ely Cathedral stands high on its island looking out across the fenland. It was built by the Normans as a testimony to their victory following the defeat of Hereward the Wake.

Since then it has witnessed other battles – and at the outbreak of the First World War, there was a fear that the beautiful cathedral would be an enticing target for the enemy.

In August 1914 papers were full of an attack on the Belgian University town of Louvain and of the atrocities committed there.

It provoked a general anti-German feeling in Ely, and rumours spread that local tradespeople were of

German nationality. This led to a loss of trade, even though all denied the claims.

The plight of the Belgians so impressed Ely folk that they invited some Belgians to seek safety in the city.

The first refugees, three young ladies, arrived in October 1914. By January there were 27. In all about sixty made their home in Ely during the course of the war.

Regular troops had been called away to France at the start of the conflict and local men enlisted in their hundreds. When numbers flagged they were encouraged by recruiting parties.

Above, war workers. In July 1916 Ely basket maker Mr Frear complained that millions of shell baskets were being made which had led to a shortage of fruit baskets. Seven of his men had gone to war and one had been killed leaving only nine. If another was taken, he reported, he would lose production of 1,000 baskets.

In January 1915 an armoured car containing soldiers and Maxim guns stopped in St Mary's Street for some time and attracted considerable attention.

Local lads might not know how to drive, but fenmen knew how to dig ditches, and by July 1915, 753 Ely men had enlisted, out of a male population of only 3,909 – almost 20 per cent of the men of the town.





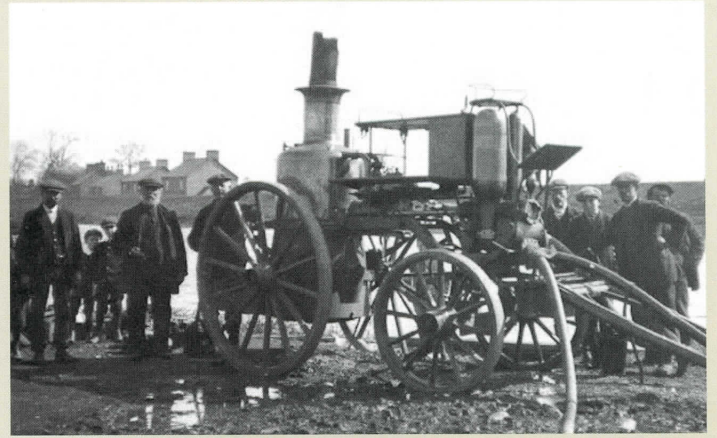
The initial fear in Ely was that the Germans would land on the east coast. The Isle would be the first to be attacked, so plans were laid for banks to be blasted and the land flooded. Emergency Committees were set up and instructions given as to what to do in the event of an invasion.

All horses, mules, donkeys, motors, bicycles, carts, carriages and other vehicles, harnesses, petrol and boats were to be moved as far as practical from the area of military operations. Livestock was required to be driven off (but not along) public roads, which were reserved for military purposes. When troops were encountered, civilians were to move aside and leave the route clear.

It was to be a war fought with horses, and the army scoured the Fenland area seeking animals. The horses at the front also needed to be fed; in September 1917 Gunner Hunt from Downham wrote home to say that a label on a bale of clover with which he fed his horse had come from farmer Cooke of his home village.

Those who went to the front saw unforgettable sights and wrote letters saying: "Keep the home fires burning." In Littleport people were unfortunately doing just this when the chaff factory caught fire in April 1915, lighting up the sky for miles around. Elsewhere lights were being extinguished. The fear was air raids. Zeppelins crossed the coast at Kings Lynn and followed the railway line down to London.

Ely decided that in the event of a raid it would sound the jam factory hooter. About 7:30 one night the sound of engines was heard in the sky over Isleham Fen. Luther Brooks saw the Zeppelin quite plainly: *"It got nearer with a rum rum noise; then a sound like a huge rocket, a hissing kind of noise, then a terrible big bang and flash - it was more light than daylight;*



A fire engine attends the chaff factory fire in April 1915

*everything was shaking - just like a severe thunderstorm and knocked the tin bath off the nail in the outhouse."*



An aeroplane brought into Ely by boat

Aeroplanes became common by day and night. A number came down, and were guarded by special constables or Volunteers. Often they could be repaired and take off again, but one that landed between the Bedford Rivers had to be brought back to Ely by boat.



A hundred and fifty special constables were appointed, chiefly local businessmen.

They were supplemented by a Volunteer Training Corps formed following a meeting at the Porta in February 1915.

Together they defended bridges, waterworks and gas works with the help of Boy Scouts, the leader being issued with a revolver (left, guarding a local bridge).

But as trenches began to spread across Europe, the fear of an invasion of the east coast receded, and the guards were eventually stood down.





Wounded men returning from the front were moved to convalescent hospitals, such as this one in Silver Street, Ely.

Later it moved to larger premises at the Theological College, and it became a familiar sight to see heroes from battlefields walking the streets.

Despite their wounds, most seemed cheerful.

By the time the Hospital closed in May 1919 it had treated 1,117 patients.

In Ely a Flying Park was set up in a series of sheds adjacent to the railway station from which stores were distributed.

Locals complained of the amount of petrol being wasted by their vehicles always going up and down Fore Hill and the expenditure in decorating the Corn Exchange for parties.

They burnt gas until the small hours of the morning while residents complained that they had hardly enough to read their newspapers at home.

Stories of spies in the fens were legion - the Prickwillow Baptist minister was accused of spying and later enlisted, and there were Germans in the fens - four trainloads, comprising 2,000 prisoners, had paused at Ely station in April 1915 for water.

Others came to work on the land. In Ely 32 Germans were housed in the Infectious Diseases hospital, at Littleport they stayed at The Grange and 25 were based at the 'No Hurry' pub in Upware.

The prisoners were not guarded carefully as it was thought that the last thing they wanted would be to

go back to Germany. However there were rumours of escaping prisoners being chased at bayonet point across the fens.

It was not just Germans being taken prisoner; pictures appeared of local men in German Prisoner of War camps and appeals were organised to supply comforts.

A "Flying Fund" was established at Soham to supply cigarettes for troops, bringing letters of thanks:

*"I was forward with two guns in a position which for 48 hours was continuously shelled. The dug-outs were blown in, men killed and all of us suffering from fumes of bursting shells. About the only comfort was a cigarette and it was that which kept many of us going."*

As food became short, rationing was introduced and 'no beer' notices became common. Butchers at Haddenham and Prickwillow reported shortages, whilst those at Ely were accused of overcharging.

Ely magistrates sentenced an eight year old boy to be whipped and sent to prison for a fortnight for stealing bread. He'd been sent shopping by his father but had

stolen a loaf and kept the money.

With farming put under intense pressure, Frederick Hiam was appointed director of vegetable supplies to the Ministry of Food.

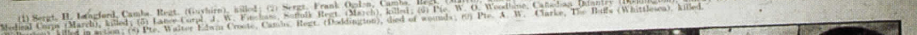
German prisoners and British soldiers were drafted in to help with the harvest - though they found the work too hard. Women also joined the workforce. A thirteen-year-old girl drove three horses in a reaping machine and cut down acres of barley. She also milked three cows daily.

The War Agricultural Committee urged the ploughing up of pasture and farm tractors were advertised for £375 while the Eagle Foundry stocked Avery paraffin tractors and Cockshutt ploughs.

But the farm workers complained that with rising prices their wages were insufficient, and the agricultural labourers' union fought for better conditions.

Some had no sympathy - one Rector said: *"I am far too much interested in the welfare of the families of men at the front to care very much about those who remain safely at home and seem to forget there is a war on."*





**CAMBS. SOLDIERS KILLED**  
**AND WOUNDED**

Aug. 25th. Although having had several narrow escapes he has had somewhat of a charmed life. We understand he is progressing as well as can be expected, and it is hoped he will shortly be able to again visit his home.

MILITARY PRESS FOR BUSINESS  
MEN.

SOHAM

You can find more information in  
the displays at the event, and  
from  
[www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/](http://www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/)  
Mike Petty